

A CARTOGRAPHY OF CHANCE: AN INTERVERSATION WITH CARLA BILLITTERI AND JAMES WAGNER

written by Guest Contributor | January 23, 2015



Carla Billitteri: *Regarde!*



James Wagner: !!

Carla Billitteri: Silly, isn't it? This is me—by way of a friend archivist—travelling back in time.

The best image—the image that made me think of you.

James Wagner: Why do you think of me when you see this? I sort of understand intuitively what you mean, though, just in looking at it.

Carla Billitteri: This struck me as the cartography of many of your poems: the sense of a closure that looks familiar, a serrated edge that is not hurtful but gently composed (and also suggestive of a gentle movement of separation from a whole); the semi-geometrical/semi-organic pattern in the figures of excavation// many of which present the allure of the comprehensible—but are in fact enigmatic in their interruptions. A sense of precise finitude in what is in fact left open. I am still thinking whether this is your poetics//maybe for that I should look at another image.

Perhaps — a poetics cannot be defined by one image. Let me put it this way: this map is suggestive of some of the main events in your writing. Meditating through the day on images of other worlds and thinking in parallel about the language-worlds of some of the poetry I like...

James Wagner: You are keen! I especially like the area in the map which has seemingly no connection to any other section. Like, how did they even manage to get there? This thrills me. And also those tendrils going out, but not connecting. There are several. But there is a basic plan. There's implicit in it a search for some kind of meaning, perhaps. My eyesight is too poor to read the glyphs on the right side. It seemed one said Africa. But maybe that's wrong.

I think much of my distrust of enclosing systems, or explanatory ones, was probably based on my being raised in Catholicism, in that rich and strange universe. (Probably also extra intense because the community was German, so perhaps more forceful in the certainty of the uncertain.) Very early on, though, I didn't trust what was being said, and I have no idea why that is. I

take no credit for my skepticism—it seems innate. Perhaps when I feel someone is pushing too hard at something, I start to wonder why that pushing is so important. Or something like this. This gets at what interests me now, over the last couple of months, of the prooflessness of the world. Of what one is saying. How we say and say, and yet there is nothing under it. Well, I say that in *Thrown* (“a nothing’s under it”). But that last stanza in the book gets to it better:

The uncertainty in the
visual animal, stepping in
dimensions, voicing
voids, then the plenitude.

Carla Billitteri: Yes! This is It! Glad to be on the same wavelength here. Love to see the permeability of minds in act.

“Prooflessness of the world” – this is beautifully said. This often occupies my thoughts: what we experience but do not understand. Experience as what acts on us, as a sort of habitual *proofless* accident. This sense of experience is the fractured plenitude you write about. The plenitude that comes through the articulation of our accidental inhabitation (“voicing voids”).

James Wagner: People just announce things, and then people agree with it, but no one goes back to the originary thing and how A came to be, and then A to B. It just arises out of nothing. Hunches. It’s really stunning at times—it freaks me out a lot. And then the confidence on top of it all, the bluster, the grasping for authority. I have a natural inclination to be a troublemaker when it comes to this “wisdom”—to unravel it, but I have just stopped doing it, because I don’t want to be a nuisance. Spend my time elsewhere. L.always says this to me, too, that there’s no reason to play God. To just leave it be. So I do. Yes, what you say here, how we walk into. The experience. This was the idea of the end. There was much linguistic material in it. Two of my good friends both have grad degrees in linguistics, and I was talking with, at the time of the writing, a PhD in computational linguistics. So this uttering is throughout. But so much is by chance. There was a book that was falling apart in the library, and it was given to me, and for me to decide its fate. It was a US government thing, quite beautiful in its way, about getting the railroad out to the west coast, and all the geographic problems faced by the engineers. But there was a page in it with a very strange thing about the mirages encountered by the scientists, on the Colorado desert, here in CA. I posted it on my Facebook page. Let me get the link. I wanted the book to end this way. In the mirage. The seemingly real showing through, but as we advance, it disappears. It ties in with the *Thrown* in the title, and the 19 different meanings for “thrown”. Anyway, here is [the plate from that book](#)—It just mesmerized me:



James Wagner:

throw (θroʊ)

2. threw, thrown, throw•ing, n. v.t. to propel from the hand by a sudden forward motion: to throw a ball. 2. to hurl or project (a missile), as a gun does. 3. to project or cast (light, a shadow, etc.). 4. to project (the voice). 5. to direct (one's voice) so as to appear to come from a different source, as in ventriloquism. 6. to direct or send forth (words, a glance, etc.). 7. to put into some place, condition, etc., as if by hurling: to throw someone into prison. 8. a. to move (a lever or the like) in order to turn on, disconnect, etc., an apparatus or mechanism: to throw the switch. b. to connect, engage, disconnect, or disengage by such a procedure: to throw the current. 9. to shape on a potter's wheel. 10. to deliver (a blow or punch.) 11. (in wrestling) to hurl (an opponent) to the ground. 12. to play (a card). 13. to lose (a game, race, or other contest) intentionally, as for a bribe. 14. a. to cast (dice). b. to make (a cast) at dice. 15. (of an animal, as a horse) to cause (someone) to fall off; unseat. 16. to give or host: to throw a lavish party. 17. (of domestic animals) to bring forth (young). 18. to twist (filaments) without attenuation in the production of yarn or thread. 19. to amaze or confuse: The dark glasses really threw me.

Carla Billitteri: ...the serendipitous finding of a certain book found in the library // this is an accident // the mirage depicted there // and the physics of the mirage: no accident at all. This is *Thrown*, then: the accident of no accident at all. Although one cannot recover origins – as L. seems to think (and in so many ways I am in agreement with her, since I share with you the same compulsion to understand //and then possibly to get others to reflect on // what caused what and when and how so and why ...

James Wagner: Yes, I move with the energy that comes into my life. I become aware of it. As like messages from the beyond. I must have to use this book in some way. Or something to this effect. It came at this time. As a clue does. I try to stay present to this. When I write. Am writing.

I sensed that compulsion in you. I think we have similar wires. Not without a wink of humor, looseness, lostness, though, too.

Carla Billitteri: I think so too. I try to stay present to chance. And then I compulsively order chance into structure. The fact is: I love both equally: structure and chance, order and disorder.

James Wagner: Yes, that's it. Order/disorder. New "forms" that splinter as you get closer. Cage was ordering chance under the category of "chance."

There isn't an escape, really.

Also always amazed how people miss the most basic part of Cage's 4'33". It's just meditation. Like, forced meditation. So all the sounds become part of the meditation. It is really only an unusual piece to non-meditators/non-Buddhists. Anyway.

Carla Billitteri: I recognize the experience of "new forms that splinter as you get closer" – and will have to return to Cage – that is a most useful link. I do not know about escape (or the lack thereof): the release of splintered forms allows chance to circulate. The order of a fractured design (to go back here to the beginning of our conversation) allows us to imagine a cartography of chance....

James Wagner: I think what I was getting to—though who knows for sure (ha)—was that there is always a kind of frame in place that one decides upon. For Cage, this was "chance"—so the poems still follow in that way. The work does. Through which something is then read. This is what I meant by there is no escape. From a structuring impulse. I tried to get to this in *Query/Xombies*. This is what I was hoping to unravel. But I don't think I did. Not sure, though. It was also a work where I was interested in breaking out of what interested me personally. I began to see personality, my interests, my "voice" and so on, as limiting me content-wise. So *Query/Xombies* was a kind of way to let in everything that I would or might leave out. It was a project in discomfort, in many ways. Getting past some kind of identity. I think that was what was bugging me then. How my identity was making these content choices. Maybe I'm not being clear.

Carla Billitteri: Very clear— I wish we had had this conversation a few years ago, when I invited you to Orono. But this is a very useful conversation – don't you think?

James Wagner: Yes, it has been very useful. We are entering the real world, I think, in it. Not the world of up and down. This is that. All dichotomies are false—not just the false ones.



James Wagner is the author of [Thrown: poems to paintings](#) by Bracha L. Ettinger (There Press, 2014), *Work Book* (Nothing Moments, 2007), *Trilce* (Calamari Press, 2006), the false sun recordings (3rd bed, 2003), and several chapbooks, including *Geisttraum—Tales from the Germans* and *The Idiocy: Plays*. His poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in *Abraham Lincoln*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The Baffler*, *Boston Review*, *Fence*, *6x6*, *Sleepingfish*, *Zoland Poetry*, and elsewhere. He lives in California.



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